Turtles, frogs, snakes, lizards and other herps: habitat basics

Head and shoulders Photo of DC or Soil Conservationist here

By _____ _____, District Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service, _____ County.

Frogs, salamanders, turtles, snakes, lizards, toads and other amphibians and reptiles may be fascinating to some people, and arouse fear in others. In any case, they are an important part of the web of life.

They're grouped together as herps, or herptiles, abbreviations of the word "herptofauna."

Their habitat varies across the country, and by species. While it is difficult, and sometimes misleading, to generalize, there are similarities of habitat needs for the group.

Food. With so many different species and habitats, herp food needs vary greatly. In general, though, herps play a role in the balance of nature by eating insects, rodents, and other pest species. Since they don't require much energy daily, they can go a long time between meals.

Moisture. Most amphibians breed in wetlands, so they need ready access to moisture in their home range. As habitat dries, they will seek moist shelter to wait for wetter weather-- salamanders may burrow below ground, for instance.

Varying habitats. Many species of amphibians and reptiles use different habitats during the year. Salamanders may live in the forest but travel to wetlands to breed every spring. Turtles may live in wetlands but must travel onto land to lay their eggs.

For some species, hibernation sites are few and far between, and they may have to move through a number of habitats. This habitat diversity makes it very important for herps to be able to get from one primary habitat to another . Roads and crop fields inhibit their movement, and they need travel corridors for protected movement.

Thermoregulation. Many herps need to acquire heat from their surroundings to regulate their body temperature. They may bask in the sun if they are too cold, or seek shade or go underground if they are too hot. This "thermoregulation" dependence ties them closely to their habitat.

Hibernation. Most northern herps either hibernate or become less active in the winter. Many snakes migrate to rocky outcroppings which they share; others including the garter snake spend the winter underground in crayfish burrows. Turtles and frogs find shallow wetlands where water is deep enough that it doesn't completely freeze.

For more information, stop at our office at __(Number) (Street) in (city) , or visit the web at http://herpcenter.ipfw.edu

Or, visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute at *www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov*

Red-eared turtles are aquatic, but lay their eggs on land and often spend much of their day sunning on rocks or logs.

Wildlife Ways

Did you know....

Wood frogs burrow into the leaves of the forest floor to hibernate, and have an amazing capacity to survive being frozen over the winter.